

## Basing Identification of High Ability/High Potential Students on Research-Supported Best Practices

Montana schools must employ comprehensive and appropriate measures in identifying high ability/high potential students. Generally, 5 to 10 percent of a school's population are likely to be identified as high ability/high potential. Based on the characteristics of high ability/high potential agreed upon by a district's **advisory committee** and adopted by its school board, the district must create a consistent means of identifying students for the gifted program.

Districts must recognize the range of individual differences within the group identified as high ability/high potential. It is difficult to justify a single arbitrary "cut" score as a single measure allowing entrance into a gifted program. High ability/high potential learners do not fall into a **homogeneous group**, and they rarely express their talents in the same way. Districts must consider diversity within gifted populations. The district will build a quality program for high ability/high potential students by focusing on the learning needs of each student, rather than on the "institution" of identifying.

High quality systems for identifying high ability/high potential students use many measures to discover different gifts or talents even when "masked" by personal and social issues such as disabilities, cultural differences, and/or low socioeconomic station. There is no "perfect" way to identify high ability/high potential; however, there are some recommendations.

Define the steps of the process you will use to identify high ability/high potential students.

Often, districts set aside a formal observation period during the school year (four to six weeks) in which students are screened with observation and formal **screening instruments**. High-quality instruments may be used as guides for the observation. Identification of high ability/high potential students should not be determined by one instrument. Conversely, one score should not prevent a student from being identified. Having multiple criteria means using different types of **screening instruments**. High achievement scores are only one form of criteria. Most districts use a combination of evaluation methods to include cognitive abilities, achievement, and observations of strengths. It is important to use an instrument that will take some time and consideration, is not biased, and is not based on "teacher pleasing." It is also vital when using any instrument to use it in its entirety. These measures have been researched and field tested. "Cherry picking," or selecting certain items, will destroy the instrument's **reliability and validity**. Evidence can be gathered from:

- Standardized tests
- IQ tests
- Referral forms
- Other methods

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*Ability alone may be insufficient to predict success in gifted programs, let alone life endeavors. Non-intellectual factors like motivation, personality, persistence, and concentration impact greatly on creative productivity at particular stages of development but also over the lifespan. Thus our identification processes may need to be sensitive to students whose ability threshold may be slightly lower but whose capacity and zeal to do work in a given domain may be very high. Tapping into these non-intellectual strengths can best be accomplished through performance and portfolio-based assessment protocols coupled with careful observation of performance over time.*

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~ VanTassel-Baska, J.

The *Dilemma of Effective Identification Practices in Gifted Education* in *The Communicator*, vol. 31, 2000.



The most useful standardized achievement tests for identifying high ability/high potential students are those that do not have a grade level “ceiling.” If the highest a student can score is the top of the grade level he or she is in, the district has no way to tell specifically where the student’s true level of knowledge and skill is. See the chart on page 19 for suggestions.

Many districts find it useful to conduct a teacher-administered standardized ability test, **intelligence test** (IQ), or test of aptitude or potential for all students at a single grade level. Students new to the district can take the same test as they enter. Frequently, the results of this testing can illuminate many kinds of student needs—high ability/high potential students and students who need additional time and supports for learning.

A teacher or parent referral is another element of the identification process. It may be helpful for you to have a short form to use when a teacher, parent, or other individual asks to refer a student to the program. A sample is provided in **Appendix H**.

Keep parents informed about any screening and possible placement in district programs that provide advanced academic services. Request parents' written permission to complete screening. Use a standardized letter with a permission portion to return. Include information about how the results of the screening will be used to tailor instruction for students and that parents will be informed of the results.

Assure that the process is fair, unbiased, and consistent.

All assessment instruments have advantages and disadvantages. Choose instruments that may complement each other to identify the types of high ability/high potential your district’s guiding principles outline. Be sure that the instruments you choose are:

- *Fair*: Choose instruments that have been proven to be valid with a broad range of students.
- *Unbiased*: Low income and/or low language **skills** within student populations must not prevent students from being identified.
- *Consistent*: Processes and instruments should be applied to *all* the students being screened. Avoid using some instruments for some students and alternative instruments for other students.

Although identification as high ability/high potential usually applies to students with scores in the 95th percentile of students at the same grade level, a hard “cut” score makes identification as high ability/high potential more difficult to defend. Using a hard “cut” score makes it more likely to miss some students who should be identified as high ability/high potential. The results of screening, observation, achievement tests, and IQ assessments should be recorded on a student profile (see example on page 81) that provides a range of scores and includes observations from people close to the student.

The table on the next page outlines some of the most frequently used methods of identifying high ability/high potential students.

#### *Identification Process*

### *Recommendations from the National Association for Gifted Children*

Typically, identification policies and procedures are determined at the district level.

Because no two gifted children are alike, it is important to collect information on both the child's performance and potential through a combination of objective (quantifiably measured) and subjective (personally observed) identification instruments to identify gifted and talented students.

Districts typically follow a systematic, multiphased process for identifying gifted students to find students who need services beyond the general education program.

- Nomination or identification phase.
- Screening or selection phase.
- Placement phase.

In the nomination and screening phase, various identification tools should be used to eliminate bias.

Learn more at the [\*National Association for Gifted Children\*](#).

## Testing Mechanisms Used to Identify High Ability/High Potential Elementary Students

IQ or Cognitive Tests (Consider using with all students at one grade level)	Achievement Tests (Need to be “open” at the top to see where the student’s new learning begins)	Referral or Observation Forms (Forms help keep this consistent, unbiased, and fair)	Other
<i>CogAT: Cognitive Abilities Test.</i> Intent is to measure general and specific reasoning abilities. This test can be administered to groups of students K-12. Tests results can help teachers understand the cognitive development of their students and assist in planning effective instruction.	<i>MAP: Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress.</i> This assessment allows students to go as far as they can and provides growth targets for individual students. MAP assessments are aligned with <b>core curriculum</b> standards. These tests provide a quality assessment process for all students while providing an opportunity for high ability/high potential students to move beyond their grade level material.	<i>TILS: Teacher Inventory of Learning Strengths.</i> From <i>Re-Forming Gifted Education</i> , (2002) Karen B. Rogers, Ph.D. Dr. Rogers includes several other inventories for assessing learning strengths.	<i>Assessment for Exceptional Potential Portfolio Process (Shaklee, 1989).</i> For Grades K-3; relies on multiple sources of data from a minimum of four persons who know the child well. The data is collected over a 12-week time frame.
<i>TABs: Traits, Attributes, and Behaviors.</i> Research consistently associates the results of this test with the psychological construct of high ability/high potential and tends to cut across cultural and economic groups.	<i>SBAC: Montana Smarter Balanced Assessment.</i> Is aligned with Montana’s content standards in English language arts, literacy, and mathematics. Provides a means to assess students’ progress in the curriculum through free interim assessments.	<i>PIP: Parent Inventory for Finding Potential.</i> From <i>Re-Forming Gifted Education</i> , (2002) Karen B. Rogers, Ph.D. Dr. Rogers includes several other inventories for assessing learning strengths.	<i>Purdue Academic Rating Scales and Purdue Vocational Rating Scales.</i> Works well for middle and high school students. The rating scales may be administered by the teacher in the talent area.
<i>Naglieri Nonverbal Test.</i> Employs nonverbal sections; sensitive to children with lower language skills and to children from low socioeconomic conditions.	<i>ITBS: Iowa Test of Basic Skills.</i>	<i>KOI: Kingore Observation Inventory.</i> An observation instrument for classroom teachers to note the behaviors of K-3 high ability/high potential students over a six-week period.	
<i>Raven.</i> Employs nonverbal sections; sensitive to children with lower language skills and to children from low socioeconomic conditions. Shorter and simpler to administer; offers a view of <b>problem-solving</b> and mathematical abilities different from a typical verbal test.	<i>Iowa Acceleration Scale.</i> Used to gather data to support or refute student’s readiness for skipping a grade.	Scales for Rating Behavior Characteristics of superior Students (Renzulli) <i>or</i> Harrison Observation Checklist. <i>Includes both teacher pleasing and not-teacher pleasing behaviors.</i>	
<b>WISC: Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children.</b>	<b>Terra Nova.</b>		
<b>Stanford-Binet.</b>	<b>CAT: California Achievement Test.</b>		
<b>Otis-Lennon.</b>			
<b>K-BIT: Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test.</b>			

See publishers and resources for obtaining various testing mechanisms in [Appendix J](#).

## Using the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT)

CogAT is a group ability test that measures reasoning ability as described below.

- *Verbal Reasoning (V)* is a person's ability to perceive and understand concepts and ideas expressed in words (to remember and rearrange the order of words, to understand them, and to make judgments about them).
- *Quantitative Reasoning (Q)* requires the application of mathematical concepts and skills to solve real world problems (understanding of the basic relationships needed for learning mathematics including number problems, relationships between numbers, and the rules that explain them).
- *Nonverbal Reasoning (N)* calls for the ability to analyze information and solve problems using visual clues or by manipulating objects (considers a child's ability to use thinking skills in new situations).

The *Composite Score* (V+Q+N) combines scores from each of the above batteries and is a general statement of a student's reasoning ability and provides a reliable prediction of achievement in all areas of student learning.

The *Ability Profile Score* is an interpretation of the pattern and levels of a student's test scores. With this score, teachers and parents can access information about general characteristics of the learner, instructional suggestions for students with similar profiles, and additional resources and support materials. The [\*Ability Profile Interpretation System\*](#) is a free service.

**Administrative Details of Testing:** Since the CogAT is a group ability test and can be administered by the classroom teacher, all students in one grade level can be assessed at the same time. When all students are tested, the results can help determine student academic needs, not just those for high ability/high potential students, but also for students who may need other kinds of **interventions**.

**Using CogAT Results to Determine Student Services:** Using CogAT data provides the classroom teacher with a better understanding of a student's potential and aptitude. At times, high ability/high potential students do not demonstrate their gifts within the classroom setting. Therefore, if a teacher relies only on achievement scores or classroom assessments, students who need high ability/high potential interventions to meet their needs may not be recognized. Teachers can use the Ability Profile Score derived from CogAT to understand characteristics of students with similar scores and implement instructional strategies for them. Since CogAT measures reasoning ability in three different areas (verbal, quantitative, and nonverbal), student strengths/weaknesses are more easily recognized.

**Benefits of using CogAT for Gifted Education Identification.**

- Screening all students in one grade level allows for an equal opportunity for all students to be identified for gifted programs.
- Specific areas of strength can be built upon and areas of weaknesses can be supported once identified.
- The *Ability Profile Score* describes a student's cognitive ability and gives access to instructional suggestions.
- Some gifted students do not perform well on achievement tests or their behavior may keep them from being referred for services. Including a cognitive ability test as one of the multiple measures for identification helps form a more complete picture of a student's academic potential.

## Develop Additional Strategies for Middle and High School Identification

Recognizing and developing talents is a long-term process involving teachers, parents, and students themselves. The process outlined above serves elementary schools well but, as students progress through the school system, it becomes more difficult for a district to adhere to all the steps. Most high ability/high potential students should be identified before they reach the middle school years. The school counselor becomes an important link to make sure students identified as high ability/high potential in elementary school are placed appropriately in middle school. The high school counselor then follows those students in high school. For new middle or high school students entering the system or students who exhibit an extreme talent in a specific academic area, a different approach may be needed. These students usually spend less than an hour each day with any one teacher, so identification is often based on performance in a specific area of strength. The [Purdue Academic Rating Scales and Purdue Vocational Rating Scales](#) (Feldhusen, Hoover, & Sayler, 1997) works well for this higher age group. Auditions and portfolios are also appropriate identification tools. Frequently, older high ability/high potential students are able and willing to self-refer to a gifted program. IQ instruments are not usually administered at the secondary level. Whatever process a district chooses to use must continue to be bias-free, fair, and consistent.

## Consider the Possibility of “Twice Exceptional” Learners

**Twice exceptional** students are those who exhibit evidence of high ability/high potential or a gift, talent, or ability combined with a disability that suppresses the student’s ability to achieve his or her potential. Often the gifted aspect of these children is not recognized while attention is directed toward the disability that may include dyslexia, auditory processing problems, visual processing deficits, emotional/behavioral disabilities, ADD or ADHD, and autism. The three types of twice exceptional students who are often identified are (1) a student who has been identified as high ability/high potential, yet is struggling in school, (2) the child identified as learning disabled and her or his giftedness has not been recognized, and (3) a student who is considered ineligible for gifted services or learning-disabled services (Dawn Beckley, UCONN, 1998). Often, twice exceptional students exhibit many of the same key characteristics as **underachieving** gifted children (Silverman, 1989). There is no single identification method for twice exceptional students. As with all students, it is important to use a combination of tests, rating scales, and other measures.

## Consider Masked Giftedness Due to Culture or Poverty

The condition that most discriminates against the identification of high ability/high potential students is poverty. More than cultural or ethnic differences, low socioeconomic status creates a nearly insurmountable barrier. This group of children often lacks the vocabulary or prior experiences to do well on standardized tests. It is important to use a non-verbal instrument to measure IQ for these students. Often there is a noticeable discrepancy between the non-verbal scores and achievement test data for these students. Low income students may be good problem solvers and may exhibit this through problem solving assessments, discussions, or interviews. As with any subgroup of gifted students, multiple measures that are fair, non-biased, and consistent must be used and a profile must be developed to assess the ability or potential of the student.

## Alternate Pathways

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*Some high ability/high potential students will not perform as well as expected on standardized instruments, even though teachers and family members just know there is something exceptional about the student. This is more likely to occur if the student is twice exceptional, is an underachiever, has a first language other than English, has cultural differences from the majority, or is from poverty. For these situations, assessment processes can include data from products or performances or other methods through which students can prove their strengths.*

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## Identifying American Indian High Ability/High Potential Students

It is first important to note that the term “Native American” or “American Indian” does not refer to one distinct culture or people. More than 500 different tribes are recognized in the U.S., each with its own unique culture, traditions, and language. For every characteristic or **strategy** that may apply to the gifted youth of one tribe, the opposite could be true for the gifted youth of another tribe. Teachers, **gifted education specialists**, and gifted program leaders must familiarize themselves with the tribal cultures and traditions active in their district. An increased awareness of these factors aids in understanding and identifying high ability/high potential native youth who need the services of a gifted program. Information can come directly from tribal elders, members of the tribal council, parents, teachers from the local tribal college, and students. This knowledge can help educators discern how and why a gifted Native American child may express and utilize his or her talents a bit differently than the so-called mainstream students.

Many great options for identifying gifted native youth exist. A standardized nonverbal abilities test, such as the [\*Naqlieri Nonverbal Abilities Test\*](#), or NNAT, is a good place to begin. Add a formalized observation tool, such as the [\*Kingore Observation Inventory\*](#) or the Renzulli Rating Scales, found in [\*Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students\*](#), or SRBCSS. It is important to keep in mind when reviewing the results that a gifted native child may still show up somewhat differently on these measures. For example, gifted native students look much different on the “leadership” section of the SRBCSS than gifted non-native students because their style of leadership is not the same. Additionally, observation over the long-term by both the classroom teacher(s) and/or the gifted education specialist is equally beneficial in the identification of gifted Indian children (see observation tool in **Appendix G**).

Teachers often notice that gifted native students seem to excel more academically *after* being identified for the gifted program. The intellectual and academic support that a gifted program offers students can aid in the continued academic development of gifted Indian youth, as it ought to and does for all gifted youth. Additionally, some gifted Native American children feel a conflict between their intellectual aspirations and their cultural expectations. The pursuit of culturally relevant topics for their independent projects as part of a gifted program can help these students bridge what is often a gap between their culture and their schooling.

After being identified, ongoing support for gifted Native American children is an important piece of the puzzle. Three useful strategies are (1) continued services, (2) an older role model, and (3) an understanding of “giftedness.” Continuity of a gifted program through middle and high school helps high ability/high potential native students because many of them take longer to develop relationships and they appreciate long-term connections. Native American students typically do not desire to stand out from the crowd. This factor can also mean an identified student may not want to take advantage of the opportunities provided when he or she is entered a gifted program. However, matching a newly-identified gifted native student with an older gifted student provides an opportunity for **mentoring** as well as helping the student understand the benefits of gifted programming and that others like him or her have been through the same process. Finally, it is important to let gifted children know that being gifted and being part of a gifted program isn’t about being “better.” It is a matter of a learning difference and appropriately accommodating that learning difference. While all gifted children can benefit from this point of view, for gifted native students whose humility and respectfulness pervade their thoughts and actions, it is a point of view that offers them relief. They love being challenged, but they shy away from being “better.” When they understand that being a part of a gifted program is about reaching their learning needs and not about bestowing a special status on certain students, they embrace the services offered and thrive.

Adapted from Unwrapping the Gifted, a teacher blog by Tamara Fisher in Education Week Teacher, ©2008.

## Determine the Best Placement of and Planned Instruction for Each Identified High Ability/High Potential Student

After referred students are screened using the instruments the district has chosen, a placement committee—usually a principal, the **gifted education specialist** or facilitator, the student’s classroom teacher, and one other member of the staff—examines the results to determine how the student will be served. Options are discussed in the next section of this guide. Once a student is identified as high ability/high potential, he or she does not need to be screened in the future; learners don’t become “ungifted.” However, each identified student needs to be followed and monitored as he or she moves through the school system as service levels may change frequently. Generally, at the middle and high school levels, a counselor monitors these students and makes sure each is challenged in appropriate classes. Districts must keep parents informed of all testing results and placements.

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*American Indian students are very good at teasing or gossiping about the haughty and the exceptional in order to bring them down to everyone else’s level. High-achievers will often downplay or even mask their talents and accomplishments. Unfortunately, it is only one step from denigrating one’s personal gifts to the next step of choosing not to express one’s full potential.*

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~Robbins, Rockey. American Indian Gifted and Talented Students: Their Problems and Proposed Solutions in Journal of American Indian Education, vol. 31, num. 1, October 1991.

